

WEST BRUNSWICK

Trojans must replace vaunted defense

Quick facts

4-2 conference, 8-4 overall
Lost to Douglas Byrd in second round of state 3AA playoffs
Coach Jimmy Fletcher (8th year)

Departed

Alfy Hill was the most highly recruited football player to ever come out of West Brunswick. The 6-foot-5, 245-pound linebacker is now suiting up for the Alabama Crimson Tide, the defending BCS champion.

Hill wasn't the only quality defender to make way. Dylan Bowman, a 6-foot-4, 235-pound defensive end, took his talents to Liberty University, as did defensive lineman Kendrick Morgan. That trio will be tough to replace.

Maverick Pate will be, too. He was the workhorse running back for the Trojans for most of 2009 before an injury ended his season prematurely. Pate is playing football at Butte College in California, the same school that former Trojan Brandon "Bubba" Rankin attended before moving on to Washington State University.

Returning

6-foot-3 senior Quan Bates returns for his second season as the starting quarterback. Bates is a threat to run and pass for the Trojans, who run the Georgia Tech option offense. Bates is also expected to see some action in the defensive secondary as he showcases his talents for college scouts. Athletic and elusive are two of the adjectives most suited to describing Bates.

Markel Jones showed flashes of brilliance last season as a freshman on the varsity squad. The sophomore slot back and cornerback will be counted on to make even more big plays this fall.

Senior Bradley Bell has blazing speed and the ability to score from anywhere on the field if he gets the ball in his hands. Bell will be a starter at slot back and cornerback.

Coach Said It

On improving from 0-11 in 2007 to 8-4 in 2009

Fletcher said consistency in the coaching staff, hard work by the players and consistent effort in the weight room all contributed to the turnaround. But the bottom line was the ability of the players. In 2007, Fletcher brought in several new coaches and started 13 sophomores.

"I learned a lot that year. I learned a lot about myself and how to handle situations better."
Last year, the Trojans enjoyed their first winning season since 2000 and recorded their first playoff win since 2003.

On replacing 23 seniors from the 2009 squad, including defensive stars Alfy Hill and Dylan Bowman

"With Alfy and Dylan you don't replace those kids. You have to have other guys step up. I don't have a kid going to Alabama this year. We've got some young kids who are good. They're just going to have to grow up in a hurry."

On the offensive backfield

The Trojans are experienced and talented at the offensive skill positions with quarterback Quan Bates, fullback Vann Cobb and slot backs Bradley Bell and Markel Jones.

"Quan Bates has worked his tail off and he's going to get better and better," Fletcher said. "Bradley Bell and Markel Jones are as good as anybody I've had as far as skill guys. I've got as many skill kids as I've ever had. Those guys can make plays and run really well."

On injuries to the offensive line

The injury bug blew up West Brunswick's offensive line in the offseason, affecting two returning starters and

another who was expected to start. All three suffered knee injuries.

Senior Darius James suffered a torn meniscus at Coastal Carolina University's football camp, but he is expected back early in the season, possibly in time for the second game.

Senior James Johnson, a second-team all-conference pick in 2009, tore an ACL playing pickup basketball in the spring. His return this season is questionable.

The same goes for junior Billy Bopst, who injured his knee at the end of last season. Only after months of rehabilitation was it discovered that he had a torn ACL, requiring surgery.

"It makes us really young up front," Fletcher said of the impact of the injuries. "It gives us not a lot of depth, especially on the offensive line. We're going to start some sophomores on the offensive line that would have been JV players. They're going to have to step up."



Photo by Jim Harper

West Brunswick signal caller Quan Bates is a Division I football prospect, though perhaps not at quarterback. The 6-foot-3, 180-pound Trojan likely projects as a defensive back or receiver in the college ranks, but his elusiveness and leadership are invaluable to a slightly rebuilding West Brunswick club. The Trojans thought that their offensive line would be a strength until several serious injuries made the blocking positions much more of a concern. The onus is squarely on Bates to lead his team back to the postseason.

WEST BLADEN

Purple Knights, boosted by new coach, vying for respect



Quick facts

0-6 in conference, 2-8 overall
Coach Pat Byrd (1st season)

The Purple Knights have long been a basketball power under Ken Cross' leadership but their football program hopes to join neighbors East Bladen as a football power this year. Much of West Bladen's potential gridiron force is derived from teen-tank Lorenzo Drew, one of the top rushers in the conference last season and undoubtedly one of the toughest backs to tackle in the area.

Drew rushed for 892 yards and six scores last year and should make new head coach Pat Byrd's job considerably easier. Byrd came over from nearby West Columbus to replace Raymond Marlowe last season in a pre-determined move. Byrd used the one year as the team's top assistant to become familiar with the landscape and the players, a move that should pay off this season.

West Bladen finished 2-8 overall and 0-6 in conference play last year, a record they hope to improve upon considerably. The Purple Knights open the year with South Robeson, Fairmont and St. Pauls, all winnable games that could boost the club's confidence heading into the brutal Waccamaw Conference slate.

Departed

Drew's backfield mate Terrence Autry rushed for 744 yards last season eased the load on the hulking fullback. Autry's graduation means the offensive pressure is squarely on Drew's shoulders this season.

Returning

Obviously Drew, but also Darren Collins, a running back who missed all of 2009 with a back injury. Collins is one of a number of players who suited up for West Bladen in the past but didn't play last season for various reasons. "He can make an impact and do some things for us. He's a tailback like Lorenzo, so that gives us somebody quality behind him to give him a breather."

Quarterback Matt Futrell made second team all-conference last season and should be a big help in the backfield, provided he wins the starting gig.

Shaquan Whitfield is challenging Futrell in practice in what Byrd proclaimed is an open job.

Byrd also mentioned linebacker Jaquan Phillips. "He's one of those kids that didn't play last year and he's come out this summer and done a real good job for us. He seems to be a real good headhunter inside for us."

Coach said it

About Lorenzo Drew
"He's going to play a big part in what we do, not only giving him the ball but as a decoy. Some other players are going to have to step up and make plays. He's a good kid and he's really worked hard in the offseason and I'm really looking for him to have a good year."

On open QB competition

West Bladen returns Futrell, but Byrd opened the starting job to spark the senior. "That's actually helped things. Competition always brings success to a degree. You get to see who's going to be a winner and who's not."

On West Bladen's cardinal strengths

"Probably up front, both sides of the football. We got quite a few kids back from last year offensively and some kids that didn't play last year that are really going to help us on both sides of the ball."

On taking over from departed coach Raymond Marlowe

"I had a year under my belt as far as working with these kids so they knew how I worked before I took over the program. They already have a little idea of the way things are going to be. Things are going to be a little tougher and the expectations a little bit higher."

On having a powerhouse like East Bladen right down the road

"It can't do anything but help you. That's what we're striving for, to have our program just like East Bladen's. When people mention who's in the lead running for a conference championship this year you have to look at East Bladen. It does nothing but help our program."

State Port Pilot file photo

West Bladen rusher Lorenzo Drew is the prototypical "man-among-boys." The hulking senior should have a big year for the Purple Knights, as they begin the Pat Byrd era. Byrd came over last season from West Columbus where he was the head coach. A year assisting outgoing West Bladen coach Raymond Marlowe eased Byrd's transition into the head job.